

Written Testimony of:

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Regarding:

"A Growing Threat: Foreign And Domestic Sources Of Disinformation"

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Chair Butterfield, Ranking Member Steil, Chair Lofgren, Ranking Member Davis, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Elections, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Renée DiResta and I am the research manager at the Stanford Internet Observatory, a cross-disciplinary program for research, teaching, and policy engagement focused on the use and abuse of information technologies. My research involves studying influence operations and the spread of narratives across social and media networks. While I am here in an individual capacity, I want to discuss the Stanford Internet Observatory's work with the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public and other research collaborators on the Election Integrity Partnership, or EIP.

My testimony will focus on the following key takeaways:

- The rapid spread of information between users and media accounts on social media can cause rumors to widely circulate and create a false impression before the facts are known.
- In 2020, the spread of misleading election narratives was both top-down, originating from media and prominent figures, and bottom-up, with claims from everyday people amplified by influential accounts.
- A whole-of-society approach is needed to identify election-related rumors shared online, analyze their capacity for harm, and responsively communicate accurate, up-to-date information to constituents in service to facilitating an informed electorate.

The Election Integrity Partnership

EIP is a nonpartisan coalition of research organizations established to detect and analyze online rumors that interfere with election procedures, or delegitimize election results. EIP was established two years ago on July 26, 2020 — 100 days before the 2020 presidential election — to address a need for independent, non-governmental observation and analysis of election interference rumors spanning social media and media. EIP works as a multistakeholder partnership between academic researchers, election officials, social media companies, and civil society organizations.

Our observation and analysis is derived from public data, and narrowly scoped to focus on election-related rumors that result in false or misleading narratives that may suppress voting, reduce participation, confuse voters about election processes, or delegitimize election results without evidence. EIP works with civil society and election officials to identify instances of election-related rumors shared online. It then analyzes those instances, produces public reports, and routes relevant findings to social media companies. This work is transparent, with findings shared on the EIP website and social media.

Misinformation, disinformation, and rumors

It is perhaps useful here to state some clear definitions of terms like “disinformation” from the EIP final report, *The Long Fuse*.¹

- Misinformation is false, but not shared with an intent to mislead.² Misinformation is at times used as an umbrella category for false rumors, and other types of misleading information.
- Disinformation is false or misleading information that is purposefully spread to further an objective.³ Disinformation may mislead through its content, or might hide its origins, purpose, or the identity of those who produced it. It is often based on factual information, but adds small falsehoods or exaggerations.⁴ Often as a disinformation campaign progresses, it comes to include unwitting participants who spread the material without an intent to deceive others.⁵

What we observed in our process in 2020, is that intent is complicated and assessing the facts behind rapidly-evolving viral claims is a significant challenge *as they are going viral*; it takes time for officials, journalists, and fact-checkers to investigate claims and decide

¹ Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory (2021). *The Long Fuse: Misinformation and the 2020 Election*. Stanford Digital Repository: Election Integrity Partnership. v1.3.0 <https://purl.stanford.edu/tr171zs0069>

² Caroline Jack, “Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information,” Data & Society Research Institute (2017): 3, 22, https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf

³ Jack, “Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information”; Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif, and Tom Wilson, “Disinformation as collaborative work: Surfacing the participatory nature of strategic information operations,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3, issue CSCW (November 2019): 1-26, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3359229>.

⁴ Ladislav Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985)

⁵ Bittman, *The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View*; Kate Starbird, et al., “Disinformation as collaborative work.”

whether something is accurate or false. Online conversations about voting were rife with rumors — uncorroborated or disputed information that quickly spread, often originating on social channels and progressing to media pickup. Sometimes, of course, rumors turn out to be true. However, social media's velocity, virality, and audience participation — through liking and sharing, or trying to make sense of things in comments or replies — means that rumors may achieve a significant degree of public awareness long before the facts are known, creating an impression for the public that may turn out to be false.

It is when these rumors spread, and particularly when they become incorporated into larger, misleading narratives about election administration or fraud, that EIP shares analysis with social media companies and election officials. This enables state and local election officials to better understand the public conversation and determine whether to investigate claims or respond with public statements. Social media companies, similarly, independently determine whether flagged content violates their policies, and how to action it if so. And we publicly share EIP analysis through briefings, blog posts, and social media content that summarizes key findings and insights.

Rumors, narratives, and rapid spread

Narratives are stories. The most successful narratives inspire suspense and emotions for an audience. They often share the same set of building blocks — characters, scenes, and themes — assembled in novel ways. Online rumors can go viral when real-world events are framed in ways that an audience is familiar with, and receptive to.

In 2020, President Trump primed his audience to believe that the election was going to be stolen beginning very early in the campaign. EIP observed that people who appeared to sincerely believe that election fraud was likely to happen participated directly in the rumor-creation process alongside partisan influencer accounts, producing and spreading hundreds of rumors that questioned the integrity of the election. A small number of social media accounts, especially partisan influencers, repeatedly played an outsized role in helping to shape, amplify, organize, and eventually mobilize on top of false, misleading, exaggerated, and/or unsubstantiated claims and narratives.

Hyperpartisan news and large social media influencers played a role in selection, amplification, and framing, assembling the “evidence” of the crowd to fit their narratives. They spread and amplified that content across platforms. A small number of hyperpartisan media sources additionally played an outsized role, writing up summaries of online allegations for further reach and spread to new audiences. They often provided framing for

the online rumors, incorporating them into recurring, evolving narratives about election processes, participation, or fraud. This gave a sense of familiarity to new incidents, and positioned unrelated events as part of a broader pattern of election fraud.

In other words, misleading narratives were not only top-down — the sort of longstanding partisan propaganda developed and spread by prominent media and political accounts online — but also bottom-up, with raw content (a photo of a suitcase outside of a polling place, for example) or claims from friends-of-friends shared by everyday people and amplified by accounts with large audiences.

Gray line between foreign and domestic election rumors

A key takeaway from EIP's observation of the 2020 election is that most of the viral false and misleading claims that sought to delegitimize the election originated from and were amplified by Americans, including prominent partisan political influencers. Previously, research on disinformation in the political arena focused on state-sponsored interference, such as the multipronged Russian effort to influence the U.S. election in 2016. Indeed, EIP was conceived around a threat model concerned with a repeat of Russian interference in the 2016 election — an incident of demonstrable interference by a foreign actor, and distinct from any politicized allegations of collusion — in other words, a real threat to the integrity of the 2020 election. Therefore we convened to observe viral narratives and assess whether they were part of disinformation campaigns.

The Election Integrity Partnership did observe campaigns with links to China, Iran, and Russia during the 2020 election period, but they were uncommon and largely unsuccessful.

- State actors used front media websites, false personas, AI-generated faces, and manipulation of unwitting freelancers to generate content. However, these attempts were quickly detected.
- The Department of Justice determined that Iran was responsible for a malign email campaign purporting to be from the far-right group the Proud Boys, in which messages instructed recipients to vote for Donald Trump or face retaliation.
- Entities linked to Russia's Internet Research Agency consistently amplified narratives about fraud throughout the election and post-election period, primarily on alternative social media platforms. However, most foreign operations pushed a broad notion that the U.S. was on the brink of civil war.

Conclusion

The spread of viral false and misleading claims with the intent to delegitimize democratic elections is a significant problem, one with real-world consequences, and it requires a multi-stakeholder approach to mitigate. Doing nothing is not an option.

While the Election Integrity Partnership was intended to meet an immediate need, the conditions that necessitated its creation have not abated, and in fact may have worsened. Academia, tech platforms, civil society, and state and local election officials — independent of party — must be committed to collaborative models for understanding and responding to rumors and false and misleading claims in the modern information environment. We need media literacy efforts that focus on informing the public about online narrative dynamics; collaborative tech and researcher efforts for detecting disinformation networks and emerging viral rumors as they occur; and civil society and government voices capable of rapidly and transparently informing the public with accurate, up-to-date, shareable information.

As this committee works to ensure the safe, secured, and trusted administration of elections, I impart the following recommendations.

That Congress:

- Passes legislation mandating meaningful transparency from, and researcher and civil society access to, social media sites and similar platforms to enable public accountability and targeted, evidence-based policy.
- Strengthens digital expertise at federal regulators with election-related jurisdiction, including the Federal Election Commission and Federal Communications Commission, to improve enforcement of existing regulations.

That the Executive Branch:

- Builds on the federal interagency movement toward recognizing elections as a national security priority and critical infrastructure.
- Supports multi-stakeholder collaborations like the Election Integrity Partnership to ensure rapid response capabilities in a whole-of-society approach.
- Creates clear standards for consistent disclosures of mis- and disinformation from foreign and domestic sources as a core function of facilitating free and fair elections.

That Technology Platforms:

- Develop clear guidelines and consistently enforce rules for accounts that repeatedly violate election misinformation policies. Platforms should provide both rationales and case studies to provide a clear understanding of their policies.
- Ensure that verified and high-profile accounts, which are known to be highly influential in the spread of rumors and have the greatest capability to mobilize, are held to as high a standard as others.
- Provide access to data, with appropriate privacy and security considerations, for academics, civil society, and the public, to better understand the spread of rumors, their reach, and how they are addressed.
- Enable access for external researchers to removed or labeled content, including exhaustive and rapid search capabilities.
- Provide greater transparency about why something has been removed or censored.